

## In the desert, Yakima tourism keeps its head above water

BY MAI HOANG  
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

YAKIMA, Wash. -- Paige Hutton's goal is to manage a hotel or run her own catering business.

She's pursuing a marketing degree full-time, while supporting herself and her 19-month-old daughter.

So it was the perfect situation when she was hired about a month ago by the Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott, where in addition to checking customers in and out, she's gotten training on working with large groups and helped develop room packages for the hotel.

"I thought the customer service jobs, which would be a good opportunity for me to grow, would be taken right away," the 26-year-old said.

Not so. While not immune to the recession, the local tourism business has held relatively steady -- at least compared to the rest of the state.

One key indicator is hotel occupancy rates. While occupancy dropped 4.9 percent for the first six months of this year, the rate is less than half the state drop of 10 percent, according to Smith Travel Research.

That slight drop in occupancy likely reflects a drop in business and convention traffic, but a steady stream of tourists from nearby cities has kept the numbers from getting worse.

Only three counties had a net increase year over year: Thurston, Benton and Franklin counties.

And several counties reported steeper declines. Nearby Kittitas County saw rates drop 16.8 percent. Walla Walla County had the greatest decline at 19.3 percent.

King County, where much of its tourism activity is dependent on conventions, saw a 13.4 percent drop.

The economy hasn't discouraged families from traveling -- at least within the state.

"The average person is still looking for a quick getaway," said Betsy Gabel, marketing manager of the tourism office of the state Department of Commerce. "But they really don't want to go more than a three-hour drive."

And Washingtonians certainly know about the quick getaway. Up to 55 percent of Washington's tourists are state residents, according to the state tourism office.

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This bodes well for the Yakima Valley, which is a three-hour drive from Seattle, Portland and Spokane, Gabel said.

The Yakima Valley also has key amenities such as wineries and agriculture-related events, including wine tasting and fruit picking, that can be done during a short trip, she said.

Gabel also credits the Yakima area's push toward sports tourism, such as high school state championships in sports like volleyball, basketball and baseball.

"When (their) kids are doing well at sports, parents are going to support them," she said. "They'll give up other things, but they will not give up children competing in sports."

The Yakima Valley Visitors & Convention Bureau has worked to target this drive-in market.

It has ventured into social networking, giving information about the area through Web sites such as Twitter and Facebook. That seemed like a natural strategy for a high-tech area like Seattle, said executive director John Cooper of the visitors bureau.

There aren't any hard numbers about the impact of social networking, but there are signs it's an effective marketing tool for the area, he said.

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Eric Johnson, owner of Johnson Orchards in Yakima, promoted a U-pick program for his cherries this summer on his Web site.

The result: Several weekends of cars lining the orchards' driveway and nearby 50th Avenue. Most of the visitors were from the Seattle area, he said.

And in a year with a record-breaking crop, the U-pick program helped Johnson sell more of his cherries at greater than wholesale prices.

"They would buy 30, 60, 100 pounds of cherries," he said.

At Ummelina Day Spa, which is housed at the Hilton Garden Inn in downtown Yakima, more traffic has come from couples or a group of girlfriends looking to get a weekend de-stresser, said Nina Ummel, chief visionary officer.

"They're taking these smaller vacations and coming over and spending a few nights being in the community, drinking all this wonderful wine and getting that stress reduction they need," she said.

While some credit local wineries for the steady tourism from the big city, the success of those wineries has varied, said Barbara Glover, executive director of Wine Yakima Valley, a marketing cooperative of Yakima Valley wineries.

"I've seen wineries that are 150 percent up and I've seen wineries that are 30 percent down and everything in between," she said.

Even if overall wine tourism grew, the increased number of wineries likely meant fewer visitors and sales for individual wineries, she said.

"The wineries are working harder than they ever did before to sell wine," she said.

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Industry officials say the combination of activities, such as wine tasting, fruit picking and sports tournaments, have meant solid results for areas hotels.

"We're holding our own right now," said Verlynn Best, general manager of the Fairfield Inn & Suites. "We've seen a little bit of a downward trend, but now I'm seeing a tremendous pickup."

And better occupancy has meant extra shifts for its housekeepers and breakfast crew and even resulted in new hires.

It also has helped persuade hotel franchisers to invest in more Yakima properties and renovate existing ones, said Wanda Riel, who will be general manager at the Holiday Inn, which is scheduled to open in October at 802 E. Yakima Ave.

Such additions will enhance the area's appeal, she said.

"It's going to help us drive that revenue," Riel said.

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Still, there are challenges ahead.

Convention and business travel to the Yakima Valley has declined, said Cooper, the convention bureau CEO.

Scheduled event days at the Yakima Convention Center are down 11 percent, while attendance at those events is down 10 percent, a reflection of both the economy and event rotation cycles among several cities, according to bureau data.

And long-term, there's also a need to lure out-of-state revenue.

When the economy recovers, people will opt to fly to destinations rather than drive a few hours to areas such as the Yakima Valley.

And neighboring states, such as California, have a bigger budget to promote their tourism offerings, said Gabel of the state tourism office.

That's why the state is taking out print ads in nationally circulated magazines, targeting potential out-of-state visitors.

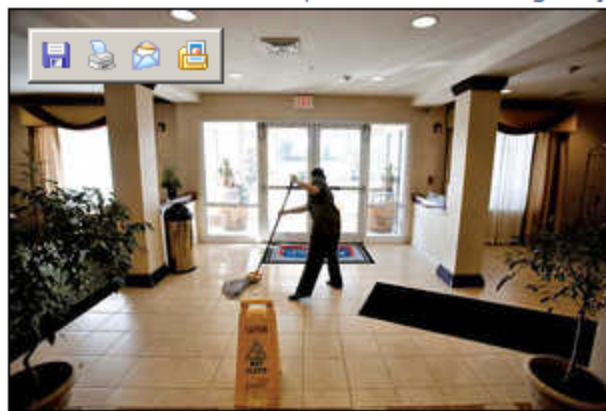
"Our goal is for them to land in Seattle, but we want them to go beyond Seattle to visit the rest of the state," Gabel said.

Cooper agreed.

"While it's great to have a close market like Seattle, in the long term we need to grow beyond the drive market, to nearby states and beyond," he said.

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2 photos View the gallery



SARA GETTYS/YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC  
Ana Arreola mops the lobby of the Fairfield Inn and Suites on Thursday, August 20, 2009. Because Yakima's tourism industry has remained strong during the downturn in the economy, jobs in the industry have remained steady and in some cases, hours have even increased.

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